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*Five Heroines Who
Defied the Nazis
and Survived*

WOMEN AT WAR

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Hiltgunt Zassenhaus

September 1944. Germany was approaching breaking point. In the east and west, Germans saw the armies of their enemies massing to pour over the frontiers of the Reich. The unthinkable was about to begin. Albert Speer, minister of armaments, sent an urgent message to Hitler from the west: "In the vicinity of Aachen one sees the miserable possessions of evacuees, setting out with small children and the old, exactly as in France in 1940." But in Berlin this reversal of fortune seemed to pass with very little sympathy for war victims. "Rather a terrible end than an endless terror," they had said in the old days of Brownshirts and street fighting before the Nazi seizure of power. Now the Nazi leadership contemplated the terrible end. The *Völkischer Beobachter* pointed the way in an editorial on September 7: "The enemy is to find every footbridge destroyed, every road blocked—nothing but death, annihilation and hatred will meet him." There was no hope. The Führer himself had dictated the editorial.

Trains do not run on time when time is running out. For many months travel inside Germany had been almost intolerable. Nevertheless there were still trains,

and thousands of passengers hardy and desperate enough to wait for them however long they took to arrive. One day late in September a train finally pulled out of Lübeck bound for Rostock, a journey of about one hundred kilometers, far enough across low-lying, flat countryside exposed to attack by British and American fighters. The train was in a sorry state. At Lübeck there had been the usual fights on the station platform to get on board. The windows had been shattered by the bombing, and in some places the doors were only held on by rope.

Sitting silently in the corner of a compartment was a fair-haired woman in her midtwenties. She was pale and appeared ill and tired. For much of the time she studied the medical textbook on her knee, only occasionally lifting her eyes to look out at the flat beet fields of Mecklenburg passing by. She seemed drained of energy and life. It was a look that was becoming familiar in Germany. War weariness, fatigue, rationing, too many nights in the bomb shelters—they had taken their toll. She was not the only one who was exhausted, but at least, in a country which had become used to being careful not only with strangers but with neighbours—and even friends—she looked harmless enough. Had her fellow passengers known who she really was, they would certainly have treated her with more respect.

The name on her identity card was Hiltgunt Zassenhaus, an officer of the Nazi department of justice. She was travelling under orders from the Gestapo. In her handbag, next to her travel documents, there was a gun.

The train stopped at Bützow Station. Fraulein Zassenhaus left her compartment, carrying a large, heavy suitcase. Bützow was a small, damp agricultural town lying in swampy ground in the middle of the northern German lowlands. She walked directly from the station towards the town jail. With her was a young man. They had travelled together in the same compartment, though

throughout the journey they had said almost nothing to each other. Now they were deep in conversation. As they approached the prison a change came over Fraulein Zassenhaus. She became alive. Her eyes became brighter.

At the prison gate she presented her papers and instructed a hesitant guard to take her to the warden's office. There she showed the warden a list of prisoners and instructed him to produce them in the visiting room.

One by one, they were produced.

She inspected them as they came through the door: thin, emaciated men, enemies of the Reich, political prisoners from the Danish Resistance, who had been sent here after the Gestapo had finished with them. Now they were suffering from the familiar effects of solitary confinement and semistarvation. She waited until they were all assembled and then sent the prison guards away.

Suddenly the grim faces of the prisoners broke into smiles. They greeted one another in Danish.

"Knud," said Fraulein Zassenhaus, approaching one of the men, "I have news for you." She handed him a photograph. "You are a father. You have a girl, born on September the fourth."

He looked at the photograph in his hands. It was of his wife in Denmark and his baby daughter.

Thirty-five years later, Knud Christensen, sitting in the Langelinie Pavillionen restaurant in Copenhagen, retells the story of how he heard that he had become a father for the first time. Outside, the peaceful waters of Copenhagen harbour lap the statue of Hans Christian Andersen's "Mermaid." "You know," he says, "the Germans blew this place up to teach us a lesson. It had to be rebuilt after the war." His mind goes back to his days as a prisoner in Bützow, meeting Hiltgunt Zassenhaus for the first time.

"I was placed all alone in a cell which was dirty with fleas. I was very surprised when this beautiful young

lady asked me in a charming, perfect 'inter-Scandinavian' language if she could help me."

The danger did not seem to bother her, he remembers. She had smuggled in medicines, letters, food. She spoke about anything, families, news of the war. "We never thought of her as a German, but as a human being, like a good friend. She was called the Angel," recalls Knud, "the German Angel."

In the spring of 1979 the German Angel, then aged sixty-two, a doctor from Baltimore in the United States, flew back to Europe to retrace the steps of her life in Hitler's Germany. It was not the first time she had come back, but it was the first time she had returned with the object of facing the past. She had agreed to make a documentary film for British television describing the course of her long and lonely resistance to the Third Reich, a story of quiet determination and dogged courage which began when she was a young schoolgirl out of step with her classmates, and which grew slowly until after five dangerous years she helped twelve hundred men to survive.

A new Germany has now been built on the ruins of the old, but for Hiltgunt, back in her hometown, Hamburg, after half a lifetime, it was the old Germany that kept on seeking her out.

Then, as now, Hamburg was Germany's largest port, a great center of international trade, cosmopolitan and outward-looking. It was said to be "the most English of German cities" but it was what happened to the hearts and minds of people here that had put Hiltgunt on the road to resistance and which eventually led her to say good-bye to Germany forever.

She was born in 1916, the youngest of four children. Her father, Julius Zassenhaus, a former Lutheran minister, was the headmaster of a girls' high school. He was

a man of deep moral purpose, a writer on Christian theology and a follower of the teachings of the Alsatian missionary Albert Schweitzer, whose humanitarian ideals and especially his belief in "the reverence for life" he passed on to his family. Her mother, Margaret, was twenty years younger than her husband, a lively, intelligent woman who was an active supporter of the reforming Social Democratic Party.

Hiltgunt and her three brothers were brought up in a home where intellectual freedom went hand in hand with a clear sense of the rights and duties of the individual. In the Germany of the late twenties, these were beliefs and attitudes which were about to become unfashionable and dangerous.

The aristocracy of Hamburg's society had always been drawn from the shipping people: ship builders, export traders and stockbrokers. The city's character, the way it was built and set out, reflected their solid bourgeois values of probity and sound business sense. Traditionally, this patrician class had exercised its sway over Hamburg's society from exclusive clubs, but in the troubled and divisive economic climate of the 1920s these clubs—*Gesellschaften* or *Vereine*, as they were known—began to lose their hold. With the great slump of 1929, Hamburg's giant shipyards laid off their workers by the thousands. Blohm and Voss, the city's largest yard, retained only a skeleton workforce to carry out a program of scrapping out-of-date vessels. With growing unemployment came growing impatience with Weimar's democratic remedies. On the streets there were demonstrations from the Left and the Right for more totalitarian solutions. In the industrial areas and dockland, membership in the Communist Party grew rapidly. But others were determined that the Communists would not have it all their own way.

Throughout the twenties the Nazi Party (NSDAP)

had had little influence on Hamburg's life. Now that was changing. By 1931 it had become the city's second largest party. The momentum of the Nazis' advance was fuelled by constant scuffles and fights between Nazi Storm Troopers and their Left Wing opponents. These incidents multiplied at an alarming rate. In one month, January 1931, the Storm Troopers calculated that 64 of their own men had been injured. In March a Communist member of the city parliament was murdered, and three Storm Troopers arrested. Communists retaliated by attacking Nazi pubs. The most infamous of these incidents took place on July 17, 1932; it became known as Bloody Sunday. A Nazi march through a predominantly working-class area of the city ended with 19 people dead and over 250 injured.

Hiltgunt Zassenhaus, the doctor from America, stood reflectively outside the Lyceum, Altona, the high school in the harbor section of Hamburg where forty-six years before, as a schoolgirl of sixteen, she had come into contact with Nazism for the first time. It had been in July 1932, three days after the Bloody Sunday demonstration. Hitler had come to the Victoria sports ground in Altona to address a rally, and Hiltgunt was sent by her political-studies teacher to write a report on the meeting. It was a key test of her political maturity. Hitler had already acquired a reputation for being able to achieve a mesmerizing grip on the women in his audience, for sweeping them off their feet. His effect on women, described as a form of "mass eroticism," has been explained in many ways, from the erotic nature of Hitler's gestures to a specially female response to his pent-up frustration. "One must have seen from above, from the speakers' rostrum," wrote one observer, "the rapturously rolling, moist, veiled eyes of the female listeners in order to be in no further doubt as to the character of this enthusiasm."

Hiltgunt remained dry-eyed and unimpressed. She watched the ranting and the saluting. She watched the crowd's swelling anticipation of what has been called "the collective debauch" and went home to write her essay. If Hitler had, as he said, "systematically adapted himself to the taste of women," he had failed in this case. "The loudness of his voice can silence you," she wrote. "But it cannot convince." Hitler, she added, was a psychotic.

Six months later, Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany.

All this was in her mind as Hiltgunt returned to her old school. She walked along the Max Brauer Alle towards the entrance, her raincoat flapping, her handbag dangling, and her eyes scanning the street for signs of the neighbourhood she knew. In the new Germany she looked out of place—a foreigner, an American tourist. Once inside, she climbed the wide staircase and found her old classroom. The class of 1939 was there waiting for her, young German boys and girls, seventeen years old, as she had been in the same classroom in the year Hitler came to power. Dressed casually in the international blue-jeans style, they greeted Hiltgunt with easygoing informality. They were distant from the war, from the old Germany; not the children but the grandchildren of the Germans who had occupied and terrified Europe. This was the new Germany, the disco generation, at home anywhere in the world, casual and confident. Hiltgunt looked into their fresh young faces. Could they really be the heirs of the Hitler Youth.

No, they told her, it was different now, it couldn't happen again.

Besides, they argued, it was not just a German problem. The Americans killed the Indians, and look what was happening in Cambodia.

"We young Germans would say No to a system of

dictatorship," said a young girl from the back of the class.

And another added, "Now we are living in a democracy, and I think we would say No!"

The headmistress and one or two teachers looked on, smiling indulgently at the wisdom of their pupils. They had learned their lesson well.

Hiltgunt's mind travelled back through the years. She could not forget that she too had been living in a democracy. The lesson she had learned was that head mistresses could be replaced, teachers could change their minds, and pupils could be brought in line.

It was early in 1933 in the same classroom. Hitler had been in power a few weeks when the headmaster issued a new regulation. Henceforth each morning pupils were to greet their teachers by standing to attention and declaring, "Heil Hitler!"

"Originally," remembers Hiltgunt, "I thought I would not follow that order, and on our way home I talked to my schoolfriend about it. And she said, 'Why don't you do as I do and just raise your right arm and mumble something?' I didn't think I could do this, and the next day when we came to school, I stood there with my arms glued to my side.

"The teacher looked in my direction and told me to salute. I said, 'No. I cannot do it.'

"So she sent me to the principal. The principal said, 'Well, an order is an order and we are here to obey. I give you twenty-four hours. Tomorrow you will come and you will do it.'

"I went home in a turmoil. My father looked at me and said, 'You must decide for yourself.'

"The next day I went to school.

"I remember that it was May and the trees were becoming green. I came to the class and my hands shook

and I was trembling. And in comes the teacher and behind her the principal.

"All the thirty girls stood up, but instead of looking towards the teacher they all looked in my direction. What would she do? They all shouted, 'Heil Hitler!' In my desperation I made such a forceful movement with my arm that I hit it right through the window. Blood poured from my arm. They all screamed and I was rushed to the hospital.

"From that time on, no one looked in my direction. They simply ignored me."

It was an extraordinary, brave, even foolish gesture. By May 1933 the brutality of the new regime was obvious to everyone, and these were intelligent, politically aware young girls. The pressure on them was enormous. It was not that Hiltgunt could have been unconscious of the possible consequences. One of her schoolfriends—who did salute—explains why:

"I could understand why Hiltgunt had not said 'Heil Hitler'—but hers was the only case in the whole school. The rest of us, in the meantime, had learned our lesson. For one reason or another we were all scared in '33. People were vanishing. People were killed and our parents begged us not to be conspicuous.

"We had four Jewish girls in our class and they said, 'We cannot say 'Heil Hitler.' And we said, 'No, you can't—and no one can expect it of you.'

"Whereupon our teacher said, 'Tell these girls to do it. We do not want to draw attention to ourselves—or to them.'

"So from then on, the Jewish girls, at our request, said 'Heil Hitler.'"

Why Hiltgunt? She herself had asked whether the gesture was worth the possible consequences. Was it not possible to show her opposition to everything Hitler stood for in some more positive, constructive way? At

seventeen Hiltgunt was serious-minded but romantic. At home the family had discussed the political changes taking place in the country. They fully understood their implications and each of them knew where he or she stood. They had read aloud to each other from Albert Schweitzer, and they knew that his values, which they so much admired, were held in contempt by the new regime. But Hiltgunt's mother had also read her *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, and there was something theatrical in her nature that drew her to the lonely figure of Sydney Carton at the foot of the scaffold and his thoughts as he mounted the steps to the guillotine: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done. . . ." Hiltgunt still remembers identifying with this man who gave his life for the woman he loved. "I thought it was so beautiful, the sacrifice of his life."

Hiltgunt never wavered in her belief that individual liberty was worth any sacrifice. But in the next few years she learned a great deal more about the value of discretion. The Third Reich itself claimed the monopoly of posturing and the great, empty gesture. It would not tolerate any free-lance activity, however lowly the source. Hiltgunt's opposition remained as steely and resolute as Hitler's armoured columns, but only once again did she attempt such an open gesture of defiance. That was much, much later—and the result was almost disastrous.

In Hamburg generally, there was little debate about individual responsibility. In contrast to Hiltgunt, the people in the street had few scruples about saluting, and when Hitler paid a state visit to the city in 1934, it was an occasion for mass celebration and a collective affirmation of the Third Reich. The fact that all the Gestapo cells in the city were full, that half the local prisons had been transformed into a concentration camp, and that an empty peat-processing factory had been taken over to

accommodate the surplus of political prisoners—all this had little effect on the average Hamburger. What was more important in Hamburg was that the Nazis had promised to save the shipyards, and Hitler told the dense and admiring crowds on the waterfront exactly what they wanted to hear. "One thing is clear," he bellowed triumphantly, "in one way or another we will bring work to every German who seeks employment."

One man would never work again. Hiltgunt's father was a marked man. On the day the Nazis came to power, the family house was smeared with swastikas. Shortly afterwards he was dismissed from his job as headmaster and the family were forced to leave their home in the schoolhouse. His books and writings were burned and he himself only managed to avoid imprisonment because he was too ill to be moved when the SS arrived to arrest him. The Nazis had no intention of leaving alone a man whose political views were so well known. "There is no time for even the smallest criticizing in the New Germany," Robert Ley, the leader of the Labour Front, had said. And Himmler took up the theme: "The only private life for a person is when he is asleep."

Hiltgunt and her family now began to pay the price for a crime the Nazis found intolerable—the crime of not joining in.

The German terror began first in Germany and it was astonishing how quickly it struck roots. "You have to have lived in it to be able to imagine it," recalls Hiltgunt. "It's just as if it closes in on you from every side. It was not so much the boots, the brown shirts, the SS men on the streets. It was really more subtle than this. It was between the lines. It was that suddenly you were being moulded into a people who were marching at the same pace. It was this demand to give up your individuality, this is what hurt. The fear that you would lose yourself. I think that the majority of people just went silently

along out of fear and those that joined the Party did so not because they had convictions, but because they had none."

The pressure was insidious and pervasive. Dr. Carl Stromberger, a close friend of the Zassenhaus family and someone who was very much in sympathy with their way of thinking, recalls how nervous he felt in the street. He had had polio as a boy and could not return the Hitler salute with his right hand. "Oppression and fear," he says, "it's very important not just to hear the words but to feel them to know what it was like in Germany. It made it difficult to think and to act."

"I'll give you a small example of how such a common feeling was spread. You know they introduced this funny thing, 'Heil Hitler' and this replaced the normal greeting between people. And this name, this word got into every mind, every day. Everyone had to say 'Heil Hitler,' so his name was always in the brain. This—I want to say diabolic—greeting was associated with loss of freedom and oppression. It paralyzed the capacity to act."

"This was the background on which all other things developed."

For Dr. Stromberger, and for a small circle of friends who thought and felt as he did, the Zassenhaus family was like an oasis in the desert of National Socialism. They were now living in reduced circumstances in a small modern house in the Bahrenfeld district of Hamburg. Outwardly, they did nothing to provoke the curiosity of informers or the hostility of the authorities, but inside the home their independent spirit remained unchanged. "Inside our home it was really like a fortress," recalls Hiltgunt, and once the doors were closed the family and their friends spoke out without restraint.

"It was gay in their house," recalls Stromberger. "You felt absolutely free."

But it was a diminished freedom, and for Hiltgunt it only cast into relief what had been lost. It was the change in people that depressed her most. At school her political-science teacher told her to burn her essays which had once earned top marks. She listened as *Mein Kampf* and the pompous works of the racist Rosenberg were accepted as unassailable authorities. Where once there had been free discussion, now all dissenting opinion was silenced. She could not understand why people were willing to trade their personal liberty and their freedom of expression for what Hitler had to offer. She saw her friends apprehensive and their parents afraid of their own children. She knew of people who had lost their jobs, who had been informed upon, and some who had simply disappeared. But what she feared most, with a sense of almost physical revulsion, was the uniformity which the Nazis had succeeded in imposing so quickly on the whole of German society. Individuality had been overtaken by the unit, the units were controlled by the state, and the state was controlled by men whom it was impossible to respect. "Everything has changed, everything has changed," her teacher told her, as if she were a simpleton. But for Hiltgunt the difficulty was simply to understand how people could have let it happen at all.

"From now on, after Hitler came to power, I was always against everything—and that's very hard for a young person because the basic feeling of a young person is to want to belong. You want to be in a group. But from then on, I was always the outsider, and somehow I arrived at a point where I was in continuous fear and anxiety. I didn't feel accepted by the girls in my class; the teachers looked at me disapprovingly."

"I remember one day the teacher asked me, 'Should you think objectively or subjectively as far as it concerns your country?'"

"And I said innocently, 'Objectively, of course.'"

"She just shook her head and told me, 'You never learn.'"

"You see, this continuous pressure made me want to get out."

In 1934, to escape the feeling of oppression and isolation which she now felt everywhere in Germany, Hiltgunt hitchhiked to Denmark for her school holidays. It was in effect a holiday from Hitler. For three weeks she rediscovered the sociability and conviviality which she now associated with the lost world of the Weimar Republic. People chatted and laughed with each other in quite a normal way. They didn't wear the so-called German look, that turn of the head right and left to make sure that no one was listening. Even the cows, she thought as she crossed the border, looked happier in Denmark.

She stayed in a beach house near Copenhagen with a house party made up of writers and artists and refugees from Nazi persecution in Germany. There she became infatuated with an artist who indulged her and chatted to her throughout the days about the political situation. One day he painted her portrait, and when it was finished she stood back amazed at the result. In place of the romantic picture she had hoped for, she saw instead the frowning image of a young, serious-minded schoolgirl. "For a schoolgirl," her friend told her, "you're far too preoccupied with Hitler."

Hiltgunt was hurt and disappointed. "I know what's going on in Germany," she told him. "I love freedom just as much as you do."

Leaving aside romantic setbacks, the contrast Hiltgunt found between this free-and-easy group and the fearful populace she had left behind at home left a lasting impression. She even considered for a time whether to stay permanently with these interesting and bohemian exiles. But Germany was her home, and she decided to

go back. Denmark, however, had become a symbol of freedom and hope, a place where life went on as it had before, and Hiltgunt decided that when she left school she would go on to the university to study Scandinavian languages. It was a decision which gave her life a new purpose and a new direction.

Back in Germany there was a very clear idea about the proper direction a young girl's life should take. The Nazis had a very simple view of girls and women in general: They were inferior. It was an attitude admirably summed up when women were barred from jury service on the grounds that "they cannot think logically or reason objectively since they are ruled only by emotion." It was not a situation that the Nazis had any intention of remedying. Hitler himself declared that the emancipation of women was a symptom of depravity on a par with parliamentary democracy and jazz. On the other hand, the female sex was not entirely useless: "Woman has her battlefield too," the Führer told them. "With each child she brings into the world she is fighting her fight on behalf of the nation." There was also a National Socialist view of what women should look like. *Haute couture* and lipstick were considered signs of decadence. Nor were German women encouraged to look after their figures. The ideal German frau was blond with wide, childbearing hips. It was all part of a world view which celebrated simple Teutonic values: Men were warriors and fought for the fatherland. Women were decorative and produced children.

The result was that the new German woman was half Amazon, half domestic servant, and widely held to be the most ugly in Europe. Their "finishing school," the feminine counterpart to the Hitler Youth, was the B.D.M., the *Bund Deutscher Mädchen*, or the German Girls' League, one of whose favourite slogans, "Supple as leather, hard as steel," says a great deal about its aims and

aspirations. Among their other accomplishments, including a high degree of athletic prowess, Leaguers were expected to acquire a sound knowledge of bed making, route marching, the history of the Nazi Party, and the "Horst Wessel Song." In order to continue her studies, Hiltgunt was obliged to join the B.D.M. She allowed her membership to lapse after precisely one week.

Meanwhile, Hamburg itself was enjoying the fruits of the Nazi renaissance. By 1935 the economy was already beginning to pick up and Blohm and Voss, the shipyard that was a barometer of the city's economic climate, started to benefit from the beginning of full-scale rearmament. Although within Germany, Hamburg was regarded as being lukewarm in its support of the Nazis, this did not prevent the Führer from visiting the city once or twice a year throughout the thirties. In 1935, for instance, he "dropped in" unexpectedly for the last performance of *Die Neistersanber* at the Hamburg State Opera House. In 1936 he came to launch a training ship, the *Horst Wessel* for the navy, named after the Nazi Party's first martyr. A year later he was back at Blohm and Voss to launch the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, named after another leading Nazi, who, it was said, though never proved, had been killed by Jews in Switzerland.

Meanwhile, the Zassenhaus family kept themselves to themselves in their little house in the Lyserstrasse. Julius Zassenhaus was a sick man. He was suffering from Parkinson's disease, the onset of which had been traced to a bout of influenza he had contracted during the great epidemic of 1918. Dr. Stromberger noticed that while his patient retained his sincere and open mind, his condition grew steadily weaker. He noticed too how Hiltgunt's mother took over the responsibility for the family with a brightness and vivacity that somehow balanced the incapacity of her husband. The family lived frugally. There was no carpet on the floor and there were no

extravagances for the table, yet while Hiltgunt's father watched on helplessly as his countrymen turned their backs on the ideals and beliefs he had held all his life, her mother preserved the animus of the family intact, and also, unbeknown to the rest of them, was also the first to put the family's convictions into action.

"My mother was a very special person, I don't think anyone who knew her will ever forget her. You may think this is the blind adoration of a daughter, but it is not. She helped to shape the lives of many people by her example and her kindness. I remember, before the war, when the Jewish people started to be arrested and little by little had to leave the country. One day, quite by accident, I learned that my mother was helping Jewish friends. I'd noticed that at times she went away for days, and that she sometimes looked very pale and exceedingly tired. My father had told us that we must help Mother as much as we could, but I did not understand why. And when the moment came, and I found out, I felt insulted and hurt. Why had she not told me?

"Later on I understood why she had to do it in secret. . . ."

The Nazis had never disguised their attitude towards the Jews, and throughout the thirties attacks on their property and infringements on their liberties had steadily mounted. Their suffering had little effect on their fellow German countrymen, who, if they were not themselves actively involved in the persecutions, preferred to turn a blind eye. It has been noted that in the entire history of the Third Reich no single body—civic, academic or even religious—ever made any protest against the regime's inhumanity. Those who—as Hiltgunt's mother did—helped Jews acted on their own behalf and at their own risk.

Hamburg itself was not an antisemitic city by German standards. But when the greatest pre-war catastrophe hit

the Jews late in 1938, the characteristic response in Hamburg was the same as elsewhere: indifference. At one o'clock on the night of November 9-10, a householder looked out of his window overlooking the Adolf Hitler Platz, the central square of Hamburg, and watched as a large body of men in civilian clothes were marshalled in front of the town hall by uniformed Storm Troopers. The men were separated into groups and sent off under different leaders.

It was the beginning of what was to become known as *Kristalnacht*, the night of broken glass. Throughout Germany similar gangs of SA thugs went on the rampage, attacking both Jewish property and the Jews themselves. In Hamburg the British consul sent this report back to London: "Shop windows were demolished, and the shops themselves were then entered and wrecked. The synagogues were also entered and smashed up. . . . The main synagogue on Grindelhof, the centre of orthodox Jewish worship, was burned down."

A seventeen-year-old Jewish boy remembers: "I had only been in the shop a short time when the Gestapo arrived and asked where my father was. That morning he had gone to the doctors: He was already suffering from a weak chest. A short time later someone telephoned to say that my father had been arrested in the waiting room at the doctor's surgery. He was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where he was held prisoner for several months. A short time after his release he died.

"During the course of the morning of November the tenth, while I was out of the shop, the Gestapo returned and arrested all the Jewish male assistants working for my father."

In all, the Hamburg Gestapo arrested 2,500 Jews during that night and its aftermath. In each of the next two evenings, a train loaded with 700 prisoners left Hamburg station bound for Sachsenhausen, near Berlin. On ar-

rival the Jews were savagely brutalized and forced to stand at attention for over twenty hours.

Protests never rose above a whisper. The Gestapo mixed with crowds which had gathered outside the wrecked shops and arrested anyone who voiced dissent. Whether the "average" Hamburger approved or disapproved, we do not know. It is most probable that he did not care. What is certain is that after *Kristalnacht*, he could not say that he did not *know* even if nothing of the events of that dreadful night was ever reported in the local press.

Those with eyes to see watched helplessly, conscious of a rising sense of outrage inside them which was forbidden expression.

"I remember my brother Willfried went to town one day and saw a Jewish woman with a yellow star on her lapel. And in the baby carriage was her baby with a star on as well, but because the baby was so small the star covered not only his lapel but it was spread over his whole chest.

"And Willfried came home and said to my mother, 'Mother, you have taught us many things, but there's one thing that you didn't tell us: that there are some people in this world who are simply just evil.'"

It was not what he had been brought up to think. It was a conclusion of despair.

By 1938 the family had grown up. Hiltgunt's eldest brother, Hans, had graduated with a degree in mathematics and already appeared to have a brilliant academic career ahead of him. Guenther and Willfried had both studied medicine and qualified as doctors, and Hiltgunt herself had graduated from the University of Hamburg with a degree in Scandinavian languages. For the first time she found herself in demand, and though she was still only twenty-two, she was appointed interpreter in Danish and Norwegian at the court of Hamburg. It was a grand title for a small office—in fact, Hiltgunt had no

office, she worked from home. But it was her first step behind the closed doors of the Reich.

Overlooking the harbour of Hamburg and the River Elbe, his vast stone hands resting on a sword, stands the huge statue of Count Otto von Bismarck, the Iron Chancellor, the founder of the modern German state. His scale is monstrous; his posture, conquering; his attitude, uncompromising. On February 13, 1939, Adolf Hitler returned to Hamburg for the launching of the port's most formidable contribution to Germany's rearmament program: the battleship *Bismarck*, at the time the most powerful warship the world had ever seen. There was little doubt now in what direction the Führer was leading Germany. It is interesting, however, to see how he at that time regarded his achievement. In the early months of 1939, in these remarks addressed to President Roosevelt, Hitler spelled out his record.

I once took over a state which was faced by complete ruin, thanks to its trust in the promises of the rest of the world and to the bad regime of democratic governments.

Since then, Mr. Roosevelt, I have only been able to fulfil one simple task, I cannot feel myself responsible for the rest of the world, as the world took no interest in the fate of my own people. I have regarded myself as called upon by Providence to serve my own people alone.

I have conquered chaos in Germany, reestablished order, enormously increased production. . . . I have succeeded in finding useful work once more for the whole of seven million unemployed. . . . Not only have I reunited the German people politically, but I have also rearmed them. I have endeavoured to destroy sheet by sheet the treaty which in its 448 articles contains the vilest oppression which people and human beings have ever been expected to put up with.

I have brought back to the Reich provinces stolen from us in 1919, I have led back to their native country millions of Germans who were torn away from us and were in misery, I have reestablished the historic unity of German living space—and, Mr. Roosevelt, I have endeavoured to attain all this without spilling blood and without bringing to my people, and consequently to others, the misery of war.*

This was the powerful case of the man who was about to plunge Europe into war. What price the freedom of the individual when compared to the annexations of the Rhineland, of Austria and of the Sudetenland? How could private moral scruple be compared to the fifteen-inch guns of the battleship *Bismarck* as they gleamed in the sun? By 1939 the vast majority of Germany's sixty-six million people had made their choice. And for those who had not, it was too late.

On September 1, 1939, Hiltgunt was at home in the Lyserstrasse. It was not what she heard, it was what she did not hear that told her something was wrong. "I woke up and it was peculiarly quiet. It was such a deep silence and it did not come from inside the house. It came somehow from the outside."

She opened the door. There was no milk and no newspaper. The street was empty. She returned indoors and switched on the radio: German troops had invaded Poland.

The family gathered round the bed of Hiltgunt's father—the three boys, all of them eligible for call-up, Hiltgunt and her mother, each thinking the same thought: What was going to happen to them now? "This will be the end of Hitler," her mother said quietly.

For most Germans it was the beginning of the sec-

*Quoted in Alan Bullock's *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (Odhams, 1952).

ond war of their lifetimes. It was very different from 1914. This time there were no cheering and jubilant crowds. The same odd silence and empty streets which had woken Hiltgunt in Hamburg stretched across the country. The British Ambassador noted as he left Berlin: "My impression was that the mass of the German people—that other Germany—was horror struck at the whole idea of the war that was being thrust upon them. . . . the whole general atmosphere in Berlin itself was one of gloom and depression." At ten o'clock on the morning of September 1, when the Führer drove through the capital to address the Reichstag, the streets were emptier than usual and passersby stared at his motorcade in silence. "There was no crowd on Wilhelmplatz shouting for Hitler," wrote Speer. "None of the regiments marched off to war decorated with flowers as they had done at the beginning of the First World War." "God help us if we lose this war!" Goering declared as he heard of the British ultimatum. It was a widespread anxiety. It did not, however, correspond entirely with the anxieties of the Zassenhaus family in the Lyserstrasse. They too, as they experimented with their bread cards and blackouts, felt the general sense of uncertainty and apprehension. But did they—a family from which two sons were immediately called up for active service—want Germany to win the war? It was a question that had its roots in troubled loyalty and addressed itself, often with tragic consequences, only to a small minority of Germans. For Hiltgunt and her family there was only one answer: No—not if a German victory meant also a victory for Hitler. This feeling is summed up by Dr. Stromberger, who by 1939 was very much part of the Zassenhaus family circle:

"It may be a very strange question, whether at that time we wanted Germany to win the war. But really—

when we thought about the situation—we didn't want it. I mean it's not very easy for a citizen and patriot to want to lose the war. But during this time, we knew it could not go otherwise. Our misfortunes would not disappear without losing the war."

But Hiltgunt, however much she hated Hitler and despised everything he stood for, never thought of fighting against him. Even today she objects to being described as a resistance fighter: "Frankly I never fought against anything, I fought for something . . . I tried to think of what I could do to relieve the situation." It was not long before she was offered an opportunity.

All letters between Germany and abroad were now being vetted, and Hiltgunt's qualifications made her an obvious candidate to censor Scandinavian mail. She was ordered to report to Chilehaus, a large office building near the Hauptbahnhof which housed the postal censorship office. Most of the work was done by civilians under the supervision of retired army officers. The instruction manual too was a leftover from the Great War. The work was routine and tedious. Then one day a Gestapo officer entered the sorting room and thrust a packet containing about fifty letters into Hiltgunt's hands. With them came "special instructions." It was these that were to take her over the line from silent opposition to active resistance.

The letters were unlike any she had ever seen before, scraps of paper, sometimes toilet paper, almost falling apart. They had been sent to relatives in Scandinavia from Jews in the Polish ghettos. Hiltgunt's "special instructions" ordered her to strike out any requests for food and clothing. At last she felt she had her opportunity to help. She began smuggling letters out from the censor's office and delivering them to an old friend of her father's, a ship's chandler in the port of Hamburg. He forwarded them through his own contacts with seamen on to their destinations. To emphasize the plight of the

senders, Hiltgunt would write on the letters her own message: "Send Food. Send clothing!" Months later, she began to find evidence that the letters were getting through. "Thank you," read the occasional note from Poland, "we got your parcel. . . ."

"Then one day I came to work and there were no letters from the Jews and I went to the captain and said, 'Where are my letters?' and he just said, 'There are no more letters.'"

"And so I asked him why. And he replied, 'We are not here to ask questions, we are here to follow orders!'"

Hiltgunt recognized in his tone not only the sickening euphemisms of the Third Reich but Prussian militarism itself, which reached back to the looming statue of Bismarck at the harbour. How she hated it, overlooking the River Elbe, a threat to the morning and evening, the first and the last sight of shipping, his hand on his sword "as if this was the only answer to the problems of the world." Bismarck might have unified Germany and founded the Kaiser Reich, the German Empire, but for Hiltgunt he remained the man who elevated belief in authority to the point of principle and planted the notion of the Germans' superiority over their fellowmen. Hiltgunt did not intend to stay at the censor's office "to follow orders." She enrolled at the university as a medical student, thereby excusing herself, for the present at least, from further war service.

Hiltgunt's attempt to avoid working for the Nazis was short-lived. On April 9, 1940, Hitler launched the invasion of Denmark and Norway. It was the prelude to a summer of spectacular success. Denmark capitulated almost at once; Norway offered some resistance backed by Anglo-French expeditionary force, but the Germans were quickly in control. It was not long after the arrival of the Wehrmacht on the streets of Oslo and Copenhagen that the first political prisoners began to be transported to Germany.

In Hamburg, Hiltgunt was summoned to the office of the district attorney. Once again she heard the words "We have a special assignment for you." Several hundred prisoners from Norway were expected at Fuhlsbüttel Prison. Hiltgunt was to censor their mail. She had the feeling once again that here there could be a chance to help the victims of the Reich. It was a chance which expanded dramatically a few months later when she was given additional duties. Instead of merely dealing with the prisoners' letters, Hiltgunt was also ordered to supervise their visits. "We trust you," the district attorney told her. But Hiltgunt already knew that she had more in common with the men inside the cells than with the men who were guarding them.

"These people were the cream of their country and their only crime was that they had offered resistance to Hitler. Of course any country would have arrested people who resisted—but the point was how you treated a prisoner. If you had seen these people, as I saw them, if you had known how they were starving, how they were riddled with sickness, how they needed help in any way—you would understand why I had to help them."

"This was something I could do because I was the only woman in Germany with a degree in Scandinavian languages. So it was I—with my convictions—who was hired."

In 1979, Hiltgunt walked towards the gates of Fuhlsbüttel Prison once again. With her were two tall Norwegians, both of whom thought that the prison gates had closed behind them for the last time long ago. At the age of nineteen Bjoern Simonnaess had been arrested by the Gestapo while trying to escape to England. He had been sentenced to five years' hard labour in Germany. His companion, Christian Hatlivik, had been arrested in Bergen in 1941 for distributing underground newspapers. He had been given twelve years. Now as they waited for

the gates to open, each of them felt the raw edge of apprehension.

"Are you scared? . . . Are you scared?" Hatlivik asked Hiltgunt.

"A little bit. Aren't you?"

"I have a feeling," he replied softly, "a special feeling."

The guard opened the gates and cheerfully wished them *guten Tag*. "We don't have many of our old boys come back to see us," he joked.

Hiltgunt's mind went to her first visit to Fuhlsbüttel. It was different then. Then as she rang the bell she knew that her life depended on her performance inside. "I had to be very official. For example, as much as I hated it to say 'Heil Hitler' when I came in, I mumbled something. I said, 'Drei Liter' [three liters], which almost sounds like 'Heil Hitler.' And the reason why I was treated here with more or less reverence from the guards was that they always thought I was a member of the Gestapo. They took it for granted and thought that I might report on them.

"The whole system was based on fear. The one feared the other. That was why I could succeed in what I was doing. They feared me and I feared them, but the important thing was who feared the most."

Fuhlsbüttel has changed little since its construction at the turn of the century. Its high walls and fortress gates conceal the familiar pattern of cell blocks with their regular rows of small barred windows. In 1933 the Nazis had walled off one section of the prison and turned it into a *Konzentrationslager*, a concentration camp. It had been judged that the conditions were too lax for political prisoners. By 1936 the block held about eight hundred men: Communists, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses and the so-called antisocial—drunks and Gypsies. It was upon them that the Nazis refined the brutalities of their concentration camp system. The Norwegians, as foreign resistance fighters, were counted among "the worst ene-

mies of the Reich," and suffered accordingly Fuhlsbüttel's fiercest regime. They were held in solitary confinement. Bullied, ill and undernourished, they were almost permanently in a state of semistarvation.

On that first visit Hiltgunt was led farther and farther into the jail, through an endless series of doors and cages which opened before her and were locked behind her. She feared two things most: that the prisoners would not trust her and that she would never get out of the prison again.

She sat waiting nervously in the visiting room. "I heard this very deep silence and then suddenly this *tap, tap, tap* of wooden shoes approaching. I went out of the room and there were twenty prisoners all lined up with their faces to the wall. And the guards just said. 'OK, here are twenty pieces. I looked at the twenty pieces and I saw these emaciated faces, the pale, almost yellow skin, the rags they had on. I looked at their legs, swollen with edema, and the wooden shoes pressing into the flesh.

"I saw at first their cold stares: Who are you? And I thought, If only I can make them trust me."

Hiltgunt was under strict orders from the department of justice. Only the pastor of Hamburg's Norwegian Seamen's Mission was officially allowed to visit prisoners, and he was not allowed to give them encouragement, bring news, say prayers or read from the Bible. It was Hiltgunt's responsibility to ensure that these regulations were enforced as unrelentingly as possible. It was her intention to ensure that they were not enforced at all.

"I am in charge here!" she told the visiting-room guard. "There will be no guards present during the course of the interviews."

Surprised and intimidated by her air of authority, the guard went out of the room, leaving Hiltgunt along with the Norwegians. The pastor whispered to the prisoners, "She is a friend. She is one of us."

"She came towards me and took my hand," remem-

bers Bjoern Simonnaess, "and she said, 'I have cards from your father and mother and your sister,' and I . . . I couldn't understand how she knew all my family. She talked a little Norwegian but mostly Danish, and I asked her how she could know my family and she told me that she had been the censor for a long time and that she had read all my letters and remembered almost every word. It was a fantastic memory and we were good friends at once."

Bjoern was not the only one who would be surprised. By the end of the war Hiltgunt was in contact with over twelve hundred Scandinavian prisoners and had committed to memory all the details of their families and background. She became an open channel to their families back home, bringing them forbidden news and photographs and passing messages from them back to Norway.

This was her first claim on the hearts of the prisoners, but there were others. "I looked on her and she was very beautiful indeed," Christian Hatlivik recalls. "I hadn't seen a woman for many months and so we spoke and I got the news and it was very interesting and I thought, Maybe you can rely on this woman. The next time I looked upon Hiltgunt as a member of the Norwegian resistance movement, as a comrade, fighting the same war as we had fought and fought still with all our hearts—not against the Germans, but against Hitler, against the Nazis, against the system. That was the main thing for me and I always took this point of view: Nazis, Hitler and Germans—and Hiltgunt was a very fine representative of the real Germany."

From the beginning it was clear to Hiltgunt that the men would need more than just moral support. She began to bring a suitcase with her on her visits, filled with homemade bread, vitamins and medicines (provided by Dr. Stromberger), pencils and paper, chewing

tobacco, letters and photographs from Norway—anything she could find to make life easier inside the jail. When questioned by a suspicious guard she answered that it contained her "air-raid luggage" and that she had to have it with her all the time. But she remembers thinking constantly that she had to walk straight so as not to reveal to the guards how heavy it was.

Perhaps the prisoners understood, more even than she did, the risks she was taking. They knew that they themselves were safe, but Hiltgunt faced dangers on every side. Outside the prison she risked denunciation by informers. Inside, the guards had only to search her suitcase or, worse still, a starving prisoner betray her for a piece of bread. "It was a fantastic thing," Bjoern told her when they revisited the prison. "We were sitting in our cells in quiet and safety, but in my imagination I felt your dangers all the time—you risked it."

The risks were enormous. Nazi justice had always displayed a cruel instinct for punishment but by the middle of the war the instinct had become a passion. The number of capital crimes had risen from three to forty-six, and in many other cases courts passed death sentences at their own discretion. As the war wore on, the judicial reflex became even more Draconian. Death sentences were handed down for anything from petty pilfering to making an anti-Nazi joke. By 1943 the number of executions counted 5,336—nearly six times greater than at the beginning of the war. Bjorn had every reason to be afraid for Hiltgunt. There was no doubt what would be in store for her if she were discovered.

Yet despite warnings from the prisoners and the Norwegian pastor, Hiltgunt continued, if anything taking more risks as time went on. She developed an almost fatalistic attitude towards fear. It was something to be overcome. A part of her that believed that as long as she was so needed, no harm would come to her. What she felt

more than fear was loneliness: "In such work you are very alone. That's the nature of it. You cannot share it with anybody because you would endanger them. I could not even tell my own family, because had I done so and been caught, they too would have been arrested and tortured."

There were times when arrest and torture seemed very close indeed.

May 1979. A main street near Hamburg University. It is late afternoon and raining hard. The light is not good. Hiltgunt is looking for an old Hamburg house that she used to know well. She knows it is in the neighbourhood but the problem is that she cannot ask anyone for help. In May 1979 you cannot ask a passerby for the way to Gestapo headquarters.

During the war Hiltgunt was interrogated by the Gestapo three times. The summons always arrived by post. It contained no details: simply an order to report to their offices. Each time she took her Bible and her gun. Each time the interrogation began the same way: "You know why you are here, don't you?"

"I remember they had the lights on you, and in one hearing I had these lights for only three hours, and I began to get hot and cold. The idea is that you finally stop thinking and just have the feeling, Somehow I have to get out of here. Fortunately, when I was in danger I turned very cool, somehow as if I were guided by a director onstage. I just knew exactly what to say. It was a question of survival. I was very nice, very harmless, as if I had no worry in the whole wide world—just sitting there, relaxed. I am a tense person, basically, but in those moments of great danger I was totally relaxed and I think that saved my life."

After the first interrogation the Gestapo instructed Hiltgunt to write them reports about the prisons and

especially the prison officials. In later interrogations she was reprimanded because her reports were not incriminating enough. The guards at Fuhlsbüttel were right to be suspicious of Hiltgunt. She was working for the Gestapo.

All this went through her mind as Hiltgunt searched in the rain for the offices of her old interrogators. She stopped in front of a gate and walked up the pathway towards the front door. Hamburg is a smart city, but this house had a faded air. The plates on the doorway showed that it had been taken over by several small enterprises. There was no clue as to what it had been in the past. Hiltgunt climbed down a small flight of steps to a basement door. She pushed it open. A warm damp mist wafted out into her face. When it had evaporated she realized she had walked into a sauna. A heavy blond girl lay face down on a pallet, and another figure—possibly male—sat leaning against the light wood panelling near the door. Their skin was clammy and appeared almost green. Slowly they turned their eyes towards Hiltgunt. "Do you know," she asked before they could utter anything, "if this is the house where the Gestapo had their headquarters?" They did not reply. They gazed at her in silence but without surprise, as though she were simply another part of their reverie.

"I don't think we'll find it," said Hiltgunt, stepping out into the rain. "The whole area round here was bombed . . . it must have been rebuilt after the war."

Late in the autumn of 1941, H. W. Flannery, the American correspondent of CBS in Berlin, reported that for the first time since he had arrived in Germany a year before, he was able to find a seat on the train to Hamburg. The German people, he observed, were not travelling towards bomb targets. He had been told to expect a great deal of bomb damage, but when he arrived at the

city he was more impressed by the measures taken to defend it than by the destruction brought by the RAF. The glass roof of the railway station had been painted over to look like a park. In the river, cardboard islands had been constructed, and the entire pattern of the two city-center river basins, the Binnen Alster and the Aussen Alster and the bridge between them, had been transformed by massive camouflaging. It impressed Flannery, but it was not enough to save Hamburg.

Throughout the following year the bombing raids—terror raids, as they came to be known—increased in number and intensity. The wailing of sirens and the cramped discomfort of the air-raid bunkers became a monotonous feature of the night. During the day rumour and loose talk added to the strain and tension. At the beginning of May, for instance, on the anniversary of the fire that had destroyed Hamburg in 1842, there were whispers that the RAF would light the torches of a new conflagration. The English bombers did not disappoint the rumourmongers: They attacked the city in greater numbers than ever.

In 1942 the optimism of the early years disappeared. The war turned sour. Newspapers were full of casualty lists from the battlefields—and in Hamburg, as elsewhere, the price was also being paid on the streets. People appeared shoddy and downtrodden. Their coats were threadbare, their stockings unattended and their shoes down-at-heel. The traditional Hamburg Spargelzeit, the asparagus festival, had passed by with just one small portion of asparagus per person. Everyone looked unhealthy and prematurely old. "How different the atmosphere is," wrote one old lady to her children in 1943, "from the first war year, when at the slightest provocation red Nazi flags were flown and drums were beaten on the radio, and everyone bragged outrageously. Since the capitulation of Stalingrad and the realization of total

war, all is grey and still. Shop after shop has closed down. . . ."

Hamburg became even greyer as the authorities experimented with a new anti-aircraft device: a thick artificial fog which covered the city like grey soup when the sirens warned of an attack and left the parks shrivelled up and discoloured.

The summer of 1943 was damp and cold. It was said that the war had changed everything, even the weather. Life in Hamburg went on. There were even optimists who persuaded themselves that the English would not destroy the city because they would need its harbour later. The RAF dropped leaflets which did little to inspire confidence in this idea. "You have got a few weeks' respite," they warned, "then it will be your turn. There is peace now; then there will be eternal peace."

There is a report of a conversation Hitler had at a dinner party in the Reich Chancellery in the heady days of 1940. "Goering," the Führer told his guests, "wants to use innumerable incendiary bombs of an altogether new type to create sources of fire in all parts of London. Fires everywhere. Thousands of them. Then they'll unite in one gigantic area conflagration. What use will their fire department be once that really starts!"

It was not the people of London but the people of Hamburg who would be the first to judge the effectiveness of Goering's idea.

On July 24, as Hamburgers admired a perfect sunset over the Elbe estuary, one of the greatest armadas of

*Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg remained in Hamburg throughout the war. Her children were in England. Her regular "letters" to them remained unposted until the end of the war. Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg, *On the Other Side: To My Children from Germany, 1940-1945*, translated and edited by Ruth Evans. London: Peter Owen, 1979.

bombers which had ever been assembled was preparing for takeoff on airfields in eastern England. It was the beginning of Operation Gomorrah. Its aim was the destruction of Hamburg. Gomorrah was not the largest raid to date—simply in terms of the number of aircraft used, the raid on Cologne in the previous year had been larger—but two new features transformed its impact. The first was a new scientific device, code-named Window, which confused German radar so successfully that most of the bombers got a clear run at the city. But more important, the bombers returned, night after night, for seven nights. The result, as Goebbels wrote in his diary, "was a catastrophe, the extent of which simply staggers the imagination."

"The very first night of the firestorm," recalls Hiltgunt, "I got out of the bunker and the first thing I saw were these huge flames—the sky full of flames. The whole sky was red and it was reflected in the windows so you didn't know what was real flame and what was just the glare of the flames in the sky."

"We stumbled out and staggered. I was petrified."

"Later the wind came up, and then it became a hurricane. The trees in our yard were swaying and the branches were cast to the ground. The letters to the prisoners were blown from my desk into the yard. You can't imagine it, you have to hear it. It was not just the wind, it was the explosions, the smell, and the noise. . . ."

"The next day there was no sun, the sky was not grey but yellow and the sun just stood out like a yellow spot. There was an awful smell, of corpses, of fire, of death, of total destruction."

"People were screaming, 'My feet, my feet!' The phosphorus which had come from the sky was creeping around their shoes and just eating its way through to the feet."

"I remember an old woman crying, 'It's the end, it's the end'—that's all that she could say, and that's what we all thought."

The result fully confirmed Goering's expectation. For a week the people of Hamburg huddled in their shelters with wet clothes across their mouths and noses, watching babies frozen with fear, while above-ground a quarter of a million homes, nearly three hundred schools, fifty-eight churches and twenty-four hospitals were burned to the ground. In one week over forty thousand people lost their lives, and a million people fled the city.

"Hamburg," said Speer, "put the fear of God into me."

For the prisoners in Fuhlsbüttel the raid was a gratifying reminder that they had powerful friends. They watched the fantastic fires as Hamburg burned from one side to the other, the lost searchlights scanning the sky in vain for the British bombers. Bjoern Simonnaess recalls his feeling of "cruelty and revenge" when one of the guards who had lost all his family came weeping to him and tried to shake his hand.

Hiltgunt's reaction could not be so simple. "I loved this city. I had been here all my life. Then suddenly everything disappeared in front of my eyes and I could see how the people were suffering. But it was the only way to end the war and I must tell you that it came to this, at least in my family, that we almost had to hope that we would be bombed—suicidal as it was to think that way—but how otherwise could we hope the war would come to an end? As a German I had to hope continuously for the demise of Nazi Germany."

In the shelters people were numb. They did not sing any longer, they hardly even talked to each other. They stumbled through the days and nights, exhausted. Occasionally someone would attack people who were wearing Party badges with screams of "Let's get that murderer!"

But mostly there was weary indifference to everything except survival. When Nazis tried to encourage their neighbours in the shelters, they were met with blind stares. The people had forgotten how to listen, they had forgotten how to sleep, for a time they forgot even to be cautious:

"The amazing thing was that as the air raids got heavier the restrictions of the government eased up, because where was the government? There was not much of a government. The newspaper didn't arrive in the morning, the radio was quite often off for days at a time. You almost felt like a school class without a teacher. Certainly there was no authority. But as soon as the first trickle of water came through the pipes again, as soon as the electric light and the telephone came on again—there was the hand, the all-guiding hand of authority. People got very quiet again. They didn't even speak up a little here and there. A little hope was gone again."

Hiltgunt watched the city she loved crumble into dust, convinced that at least the end of the war had come at last. Nothing could continue after such devastation. Ten days later in Hamburg's bombed-out station she realized her mistake. Trains passed by loaded with soldiers for the front. In the countryside she saw peaceful homes and farms where crops were growing and cows grazing. It seemed that all the dying had been in Hamburg. The war went on.

So too did Hiltgunt's underground war. More and more political prisoners were being transported to the Reich's proliferating prisons and camps. Hiltgunt's work expanded. Her visits were no longer confined to the prison in Hamburg, but took her all over Germany. The food she brought the prisoners in her suitcases was now bought with the family silver on the black market. Her memory of the details about their families which had so impressed her first prisoners at Fuhlshüttel was

supplemented by a card index system in which she also kept track of them as they were transferred from prison to prison in the labyrinthine Nazi penal system. Soon there were over a thousand prisoners to take care of, more than fifty prisons to visit, and more than fifty prison governors to deceive and intimidate.

"I am not very intelligent, but I had a good instinct for people. I always have had. I had this sense of knowing when my life was in danger and I used this in dealing with the guards. I knew exactly what I was saying in the prisons. I knew when to be kind to them and when to intimidate them. I knew how to play one against the other. It was almost like being dishonest—but it was a question of survival."

Hiltgunt was twenty-seven years old. For ten years—ever since she had first refused to give the Hitler salute—she had had no real social life. With that one gesture she had distanced herself from her generation of fellow Germans. She had missed almost entirely the everyday pleasures of growing up: the boyfriends and dating, the parties and dances. With the outbreak of war and her clandestine work with the prisoners, the isolation was almost complete. She did not even think about a social life. It was a totally trivial thing. It did not enter her mind. Her life centered more and more on the prisoners themselves.

Once, still shaking after an interview with the Gestapo, she had thought about giving it up. She speculated about being an ordinary student like everyone else, about not worrying anymore, about what it would be like to be able to sleep, about not being afraid. But when she arrived once again at the station and saw the trains, she knew it was an impossible dream. Her prisoners were waiting for her; she could not let them down. Her work and her purpose was with them.

"Once they were being transferred to another prison.

I didn't know about it and I arrived and suddenly I saw them all in the prison yard in civilian clothes and with their luggage. Some of them were even smoking cigarettes. And for a minute I thought I had gone mad—I didn't believe it. What was happening? And then they told me they were being transferred. But it was a very peculiar feeling that suddenly came over me when I saw them in civilian clothes because for the first time I realized that one of these days I would be without them.

"And I must be honest. For a minute it struck me: How could I go on living without them?"

"I had to get hold of myself and realize that actually this was really the whole idea."

On August 22, 1944, Hiltgunt's youngest brother, Willfried, was killed in action in Russia. In her grief Hiltgunt realized that she had been so preoccupied with her foreign prisoners that she had hardly thought of her own brother at all since he left for the front.

Lyserstrasse was a changed and sadder place. Hiltgunt's father had died at the beginning of the war. Guenther was away, stationed with the Luftwaffe in Holland, and now Willfried had gone forever. The air raids had divided Hamburg into two classes, the victims and those who still had homes. As the homeless increased in number they were billeted with those who still had roofs over their heads. Hiltgunt remembers when the first lodgers arrived at Lyserstrasse. They came with looks of ill-concealed envy and hostility, as if to ask, "By what right do you still have a home when we have lost everything?" "This house shall be our fortress," Julius Zassenhaus had declared when they had been forced to move there in 1933. But now Hiltgunt and her mother could no longer close their doors on the world outside. Now there were strangers inside their home, strangers who were embittered by bad fortune and whose political sympathies were unknown.

When suspicion arrived through the front door, the oasis of freedom shrank to a couple of rooms on the ground floor. Everything was dangerous now. Total war had brought total surveillance. Even Nazi officials reported an increase in anonymous denunciations, in which "individuals try to denigrate their fellows from low motives of hatred and envy." Whispers, signs and nods replaced conversation. Hiltgunt and her mother crouched in a corner with blankets over their heads to listen to the BBC from London.

They were right to take precautions. In the jittery last stages of the war, radio criminals, as those who listened to foreign radio broadcasts were called, were savagely punished. There was another problem too. Hiltgunt cooked the prisoners' bread at home from flour which she obtained from the black market. These were hungry times. It was hardly tactful to excite suspicious lodgers too often with the rich aroma of baking loaves.

Throughout 1944, in newspapers, in letters, in diaries, in a hundred million conversations, in prayers, in sermons, in speeches, in communiqués, in the underground press, in taxis and tanks, in cafés and concentration camps, in cabinet rooms and bunkers, millions upon millions of people had consoled themselves with the idea that the war would be over by Christmas.

Christmas Day arrived and there was still fighting on all fronts. Incredibly, the Nazis had even launched a massive new offensive in the Ardennes. Christmas Day in Hamburg was frosty and sunny. There was not much of Hamburg left anymore; there was not much of anything left anymore. For the past year the main diet had been turnip. The monthly allowances of everything else had dwindled with the Nazis' declining fortunes: three-quarters of a pound of butter a month; half a pound of meat. Only the rats which had infested the bomb sites and had now moved into the houses were getting fatter.

With little enough to celebrate, just to have a Christmas tree was celebration enough. "I remember the last Christmas when my mother and I were alone. We did the same as we always did. We had a little Christmas tree. We had no candles anymore, but we still had one or two apples on the tree and we had an angel on the top which we'd had right from my childhood.

"My father had gone. Willfried had been killed. My other brothers were not there. So my mother took the Bible and read the story of Christmas and we two together sang our Christmas songs, as we'd always done."

Nineteen forty-five. The gas in Hamburg was turned off two days a week. There was no electric light on Wednesdays. Rations were cut still further and the air raids were so "totally unpredictable" that Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg wrote to her children that "one cannot plan for anything."

Through all this Hiltgunt planned her journeys to Scandinavian prisoners throughout Germany. She was determined that not a single one of them should disappear into the *Nacht und Nebel*, the night and fog, of the Nazis prison system. When a group of her Scandinavians were transferred, she doggedly tracked them down and reestablished contact—with or without the cooperation of the prison authorities.

Exhausted and ill, she carried on, driven by a sense of purpose that had become an obsession. She was too tired to be afraid. She was too tired even to care about the risks she was taking. She just went on. "I was not so frightened because everything was frightening. You were frightened of the Gestapo, you were frightened of the bombs, you were frightened of everything, it became one blur of fright. . . . I was so fatigued that sometimes I didn't think clearly, it was as if I no longer cared what would happen to me. I became less cautious. . . ."

The nightmare continued. The prisoners were being

scattered around Germany almost faster than Hiltgunt could keep track of them. No sooner had one group been traced to a new prison or camp than there would come news that other prisoners had moved to an unknown destination. It was in that last frenzied winter of the war that Hiltgunt realized that she had lost thirty of her men. They were Norwegians, some of them among the very first she had visited at Fuhlsbüttel Prison in Hamburg. She knew them better than almost anyone else—at this point in the war she felt that she loved them better than anyone else. She began a desperate search to find them. It was not that she knew yet what she could do to help, but she was fully aware that she could do nothing at all if she did not know where they were.

It was dangerous to ask questions in the Third Reich. But Hiltgunt was by now too involved to think of the danger and too tired to measure the risk. From jail to jail she inquired about the Norwegians. Sometimes she would play the naïve, innocent German girl, loyally working for the department of justice. On other occasions she would employ the veiled threats of a Gestapo agent. Both roles she stretched to the limits of credibility. The evidence accumulated. It pointed to a prison to the east of Dresden, a prison which even in Nazi Germany had a grim reputation for its harsh discipline: Bautzen.

"We came there and I found immediately the hostility of the warden. Somehow he resented me and somehow he suspected me although I had never seen him before. And he said right away, 'Well, I will put a guard on you during your visits.' That meant I would have to follow the rules. I would have to speak German and I would not be able to allow the reading of the Bible.

"I don't know what came over me. I saw the prisoners coming in so very much changed from the last time I had seen them. So deathly pale and the legs, thick with edema

—just staggering in, barely holding themselves upright.

"I saw these people who I loved and I saw that they really were at the very end, that they didn't have much further to go. Suddenly I did not care for myself anymore. I spoke in Norwegian to them and I let them know that they were not abandoned. 'We know exactly where you are, we'll keep track of you, even if you don't see us for months.' (Because I knew we would not be allowed in there again.) 'We will make sure you will get out.'"

"What came over me? I don't know because at that time I didn't even know if we could really get them out. But somehow I believed it so strongly—and I think I conveyed that hope to them.

"And then I asked the pastor to read from the Bible. He looked at me and paused and then he read 'The Lord is my Shepherd.'"

It was the same Hiltgunt who had refused to salute in the classroom. That time it had been the impetuous gesture of a seventeen-year-old schoolgirl. Her stand in Bautzen Prison was the decision of a mature conscience, pushed beyond the limits of endurance. She left the prison with the warden's words ringing in her ears: "I knew there was something wrong with you. I will send my report direct to Himmler."

It was February 14, 1945—St. Valentine's Day. It was also the day that the Allies decided to bomb the nearby city of Dresden out of existence.

Hiltgunt left Bautzen the following morning. Her train crawled towards Dresden through eastern Saxony. At every station along the route the rumours grew that there had been a catastrophe in Dresden. The train came to a halt some distance from the city and Hiltgunt walked the last few kilometers. She found the city that had been called the Florence of Germany in ashes. There was total confusion. The numbers killed were higher even than Hamburg. In fact, they would be higher even than Hiroshima.

Hiltgunt surveyed the devastation. Maybe, she thought, this is what will save me.

Whether the destruction of Dresden was necessary or justified remains a question of bitter controversy. However, the chaos that the English and American bombers left behind them certainly helped to save Hiltgunt's life. We do not know if the report of her misdemeanours in Bautzen Prison ever reached Himmler, or, if it did, how it impressed him. By that time he had a lot on his mind.

Germany was on the point of collapse. Speer had already sent the Führer a timetable of defeat based on the unavailability of essential minerals and raw materials. Hitler had told him to destroy everything. "If the war is to be lost, the nation will also perish. There is no need to consider the basis even of a most primitive existence any longer." In those places where Germany's armies did not retreat, they did not continue to exist. The air raids had made travel and communication impossible for days at a time.

Hiltgunt's first reaction on leaving Dresden was to go into hiding. She went to Berlin and remained for some weeks with a friend of her mother's. It was a bizarre retreat—as much a flight from reality as from danger. The house had been badly mauled by bombing. There was a gaping hole in the back wall. But her mother's friend belonged to a wealthy and well-connected old German family and had managed somehow to reserve a curious gentility. While a few kilometers away, in the *Führerbunker*, Hitler was ordering an orgy of destruction, Hiltgunt sipped ersatz coffee from delicate porcelain demitasses served on a silver tray by an old family maid still wearing the well-starched uniform of her position.

Nevertheless, Hiltgunt had lost the habit of being safe—even of being still. She was impatient and restless. She felt instinctively the insane apocalyptic spasms of the dying regime and feared that this death wish would destroy the men she loved most: her prisoners. When the

expected denunciation did not come, she decided to return to Hamburg.

Incredibly, she had decided that the prison visits must go on.

Hiltgunt was no longer alone. Concern for the fate of the Nazis' political prisoners was widespread and moves were already afoot to help them. From Sweden, Count Folke Bernadotte, of the Swedish Red Cross, flew to Berlin to negotiate with Himmler for the lives of the thousands of prisoners from Denmark and Norway. Reluctantly, the leader of the SS agreed to release his grasp on this small portion of his lethal estate. As a preliminary move Red Cross buses were allowed into Germany to collect all the Scandinavian concentration camp prisoners in one place.

But there was a hitch. Many prisoners had been swallowed up into the system and could not be found. Now Hiltgunt performed her final and greatest service to the men she had been helping for years. Throughout her travels with the Danish and Norwegian pastors, she had built up records of the movements and whereabouts of over twelve hundred prisoners. Her secret files now assumed a life-and-death importance. They were handed over to the Red Cross.

Throughout April the Red Cross buses picked up Scandinavian prisoners from prisons and camps all over the Reich. First they were taken to prisons in Denmark and then on to neutral Sweden to await the end of the war.

In Hamburg, Hiltgunt too was waiting. There was little else to do.

May 1. The wind howled and the rain poured down on the forty-three million cubic meters of rubble which had once constituted the proud city of Hamburg. The British waited at the gates of the city. Their ultimatum was simple: "Surrender or we will bomb you into oblivion."

From the shells of bombed houses the radio could be heard playing the somber and magnificent Seventh Symphony by Bruckner. Without warning the broadcast was interrupted with an announcement: Hitler was dead.

"I was sitting with Mother in the living room. It was the moment I had looked forward to for twelve years. I had waited for it and thought about it and imagined what I would do when it happened.

"But I remember, when it actually came through, I was totally numbed. I didn't feel anything: no joy, no hate. Nothing.

"I remember Mother sat opposite me and she looked at the picture of my brother who had died in Russia. And we both sat there, very silent, and said nothing."

One week later the Thousand-Year Reich came to an end. A struggle of a different kind began.

Germany was starving. In Hamburg, as late as the end of 1946, one hundred thousand were suffering from edema due to malnutrition. Only a fraction of the children were of normal weight. Soon after the war ended, Hiltgunt took up work looking after the war orphans who were roaming the streets. She appealed to her ex-prisoners in Norway and Denmark for help and they sent food and clothing. In 1947, Hiltgunt was the first German after the war to be invited to Norway and Denmark. By this time her story was well known in Scandinavia and she was welcomed in both countries as a heroine. She resumed her medical studies, first in Bergen and later in Copenhagen. But her spirit remained restless. She was no longer at home in Germany, and even in Scandinavia there were too many reminders of the past. For years she had been cut off and alienated. With people who in normal times would have been her neighbours and friends, she had been compelled to act and pretend. She felt that she wanted to find herself. She

needed a new start. In 1952, after she had qualified as a doctor, Hiltgunt left Europe with her mother and emigrated to America, where today she still practices medicine in Baltimore.

May 1979. Hiltgunt is back in Hamburg. The rubble has somehow reconstituted itself into a city again, finer and more beautiful than ever. Around the Alster, the noble buildings have regained their smart air of prosperous restraint. The hotels, the Vier Jahreszeiten and the Atlantic, have resumed their place among Europe's grandest places of resort. It is the middle of the Spargelzeit, and at home and in a thousand busy cafés and restaurants, Hamburgers celebrate with as much asparagus as they can consume, specially cooked for them in a hundred different recipes. In the newspapers it says that the Mercedes car company is concerned because its product—once a luxury to which everyone aspired—has become simply boring.

It is as if the war never happened.

Hiltgunt's mind drifts back to one of the questions she was asked by the schoolchildren in her own school. "Germany is good now. We're a democracy. Why do you still live in America? Why don't you come back?" But Hiltgunt decided long ago that she could not live in Germany anymore. Her trust in the people has been lost forever; she could never be the same in her relationship with other Germans. "It was just as if you had a friend who had somehow disappointed you so much that it could never be the same."

For twelve lonely years Hiltgunt fought her private battle to be free. Today, in America, she fights another battle to persuade people to use the freedom they possess. In talks and articles, she repeats a simple message:

There are two enemies of freedom: those who impose their ideologies upon others by force; and those who stand idly by and let them. Individuals have a choice to

defend their liberties or watch their freedom disappear; that freedom which is lost through indifference is regained only by suffering.

The message is simple, but it was hard won. It is directed at free men and women everywhere, but it is based on private anxieties:

"I still dream of these things now. I dream of my home, the home I was born in. I can't forget the day when they tried to get my father—when the three SS men came to our house. I dream of our locks, and each time I think we have to put new locks on the door. At night I am bathed in sweat thinking of it. There must be other locks! There must be better locks!—so that they can't come in. When I came and saw my house now, after all these many years, that was the first thing that I did. I went to the basement door and to the other doors and thought, These are still the old locks, they must be replaced.

"I have another dream. I dream of the trains, these endless trains I saw, and the stations. I still see my brother in the train—the very last time he left us—when my mother said to him, 'Remember, you must still serve Life,' and he didn't give any answer. He just looked at us and then he disappeared. He went to Russia and we never saw him again.

"I also dream another dream that haunts me. I am back in Germany—these days I dream it quite a lot—and suddenly I discover I have lost my passport. I rush over to the American consulate general. I try to tell them I don't have my passport and they look at me and say, 'We have never seen you.' 'But I live in America . . . I have a home there! I have a profession there—I am a doctor!' 'We have never heard of you—you can't get a passport!' 'And I get this feeling—I have to stay in Germany. Nobody knows me in America. I am lost. I must stay here.

"It's a nightmare."